Philosopher wins £800,000 award for spiritual focus

By Arifa Akbar

A Canadian philosopher has won the world's richest individual award by promoting the message that the threat of terrorism could be solved by greater spiritual examination in Western and Islamic countries.

Charles Taylor, 75, who won the Templeton Prize, and £800,000, yesterday, says lessons could be learned from terrorist acts, including the July 7 London bombings, if society focused more on understanding the role of spirituality and how it can be misappropriated by extremists.

Professor Taylor, from Montreal, investigates people's desire to seek meaning and spiritual direction, and how this quest can sometimes end in violence. He says relying on a secular analysis of human behaviour has led Western nations to faulty conclusions and that spiritual examination is needed to combat the likes of al-Qa'ida.

"I think the reason why young children turn to vio- lent in Gaza City is not just through socio-economic factors but also through the meaninglessness of their lives," he said yesterday. "They feel no purpose and people come along and offer them a 'cause'.

"Or take the people who were involved in the July bombings in London. What we know is that some were highly successful and integrated in British society and yet did what they did, because they were excited by some greater cause of Islam on a global level. They were giving some sense to their lives by becoming fighters. We need to understand this 'dark spirituality' as the West is very unschooled in this."

Mr Taylor, professor emeritus of political science at McGill University, said America had refused to talk with moderate Muslims after September 11 and Washington only "strength- ened recruitment for al-Qa'ida with its invasion of Iraq."

"We need to understand what moved people in the direction of violence and terrorism rather than quash the voices of modern Muslims who criticised America after 9/11."

"There are certain kinds of hunger that people have, including a sense of meaning in life, that comprises the spiritual dimension. These terrorists were motivated by this need to be connected to a bigger cause. It is a hunger for meaning which is found in this cause that pushes them to acts of terror- rism. The only way they can be prevented from heading for terrorism is to have a better answer to the meaningfullness of life," he said.

He will receive his prize in May at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace. The Templeton Foundation was founded by a US-born British financier, Sir John Templeton. Sir John congratulated Professor Tay- lor yesterday, and said the academic had "staked an often lonely position that insists on the inclusion of spiritual dimensions".

The first prizes were won in 1973-74 by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Frère Roger Schütz of the Taizé community in Burgundy.

Charles Taylor: 'We need to understand the dark spirituality of violent extremists'